



SIMPLIFIED SPELLING BOARD
CIRCULAR No. 11, FEB. 28, 1907

THE MEDICAL PROFESSION AND SIMPLIFIED SPELLING¹

17.

By BURT G. WILDER, S. B., M. D.

PROFESSOR OF NEUROLOGY AND VERTEBRATE ZOOLOGY IN CORNELL UNIVERSITY,
ITHACA, N. Y.

"What attaches us to our conventional spelling is not a body of convictions, but simply habit and feeling. * * Usage is another name for fashion, and fashions do not grow out of the ground or fall from Heaven, but are created by some one's initiative."

CALVIN THOMAS.

"Language is an organism; the organism that dislikes change is very ill, the one that fights change is moribund, and the one that does not change is dead."

GEORGE M. GOULD.

Like him who is challenged to a duel, he who is invited to address a society is accorded the privilege of choosing his subject. Yet, notwithstanding my keen personal interest in the simplification of spelling (as akin to the Simplification of Anatomic Nomenclature that has occupied me largely for more than the fourth of a century²) I should refrain from exercising my prerogative in this particular direction but for my conviction that it is the duty of the members of our profession to recognize the existing defects of English spelling, to appreciate the past and present efforts to improve it, and to cooperate with the simplifiers in their individual, professional and associational capacities.

The defects of current English spelling fall under two heads, viz., (1) Superfluity of letters,³ involving waste of time, energy, space and money. The following examples, representing groups, are selected from the "List of Common Words Spelled in Two or More Ways" (the Three Hundred Words), of which the simpler forms are recommended in place of the longer forms by the Simplified Spell-

1. Read, by invitation, before the thirty-ninth annual meeting of the Medical Association of Central New York, Oct. 16, 1906. Reprinted, with some alterations, from *The Buffalo Medical Journal* of January, 1907.

2. See, e. g., "A partial revision of the nomenclature of the brain, Amer. Assoc. Adv. Sci., 1880, *Medical Record*, vol. 18, p. 328. "Paronymy versus heteronymy as neuronymic principles," address, as president, before the Amer. Neurol. Assoc., 1885, *Transactions, Jour. Nerv. and Mental Disease*, vol. 12; "Neural terms, international and national," *Jour. Comp. Neurology*, vol. 6, 1896; "Terminology, Anatomical" (with S. H. Gage), in *Reference Handbook of the Med. Sciences*, 1st ed., vol. 8; "Some misapprehensions as to the simplified nomenclature of anatomy," address, as president, before the Assoc. Amer. Anatomists, 1898, *Science*, April 21st, 1899.

3. For this phrase a single word would be convenient. *Perissogrammatism* ('too-many-letter-ness') is most appropriate. If its length and unfamiliarity are objectionable there may be considered *litterosity* (adjective *litterose*), and *litage*, after the analogy, respectively, of *verbosity* and *verbiage*.

ing Board (Circular No. 2). The omitted superfluous letters are in italics: *Although*; *anaemia*; *apothegm*; *axe*; *catalogue*; *drachm*; *aether*; *guild*; *gramme*; *honour*; *hypothense*; *paraffine*; *quartette*; *synonyme*; *though*; *thorough*.

(2) Inconsistencies as to spelling and pronunciation that retard the educational progress of children and aliens and—upon the principle, *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*—tend to bring into contempt the language itself and the nations that use it. For example, *puff* is pronounced *puf*; but *rough* is pronounced *ruf*, yet *plough* is *plow*, *cough* is *cof*, *through* is *throo*, and *dough* is *do*; to cap the climax, *do* is pronounced *doo*, and *does* is either *dus* or *doze*. No wonder the alien is mystified and disgusted, and the child temporarily stultified; “there is engendered a disbelief in learning and a total lack of confidence in inference.” Were it possible, indeed, for a rational adult to begin the study of his mother tongue he would speedily recognize the grim foundation for Lord Rosebery’s recent half-humorous remark that he was “not at all sure that the archaic rules of spelling laid down by tradition and stereotyped by the dictionaries had not filled half the lunatic asylums of the country.”

From the “List” above mentioned are selected the following examples of groups of words now spelled in more than one way, the form recommended by the Simplified Spelling Board being placed first: *Check* for *cheque*; *clue* for *clew*; *compresst* for *compressed*; *defense* for *defence*; *dispatch* for *despatch*; *fiber* for *fibre*; *hiccup* for *hiccough*; *lacrimal* for *lachrymal*; *practise* for *practice*, v. and n.; *sulfur* for *sulphur*; *surprize* for *surprise*. To which I add *artifact* for *artefact*.

Upon the present occasion I confine myself to four groups of cases with which members of the medical profession are more nearly concerned, and in respect to which their precept and example are likely to have most weight.

A. The conversion of Latin and Greek words ending, in Latin, in *-ra* and *-rum*, into distinctively English paronyms in *-er* rather than in *-re*, which last is characteristically French; e. g., *fiber* and *meter* (and so *liter*), like *center*, *theater*, etc.⁴

B. The conversion of Latin (originally Greek) words ending in *-mma* into distinctively English paronyms by dropping the ultima; e. g., *gram*, *diagram*, *program*. The French tail is needless, and incongruous with English style.

4. For the definitions of *paronym*, *heteronym*, etc., see the papers named in Note 2, and “Some linguistic principles and questions involved in the simplification of the nomenclature of the brain,” Amer. Philolog. Assoc. Proceedings, vol. 36, pp. 14-19, 1905. Copies of this paper will be sent upon application to the writer.

C. In all Anglo-paronyms of Latin and Greek words containing, in Latin, *ae* or *oe*, the replacement of the Latin diphthong by the single letter *c*; e. g., *anemia* for *anaemia*, *esophagus* for *oesophagus*.⁵

D. With most Anglo-paronyms of Latin adjectives ending in *-icus*, the omission of the *-al*; e. g., *anatomic* and *neurologic* rather than *anatomical* and *neurological*.⁶

Let me at once forestall adverse criticism by three concessions. (a) In a few cases, e. g., *chemical*, *medical* and *surgical*, the retention of the ultima does not render the entire word inconveniently long. (b) Altho correct in form, *medic* now has a slangy sound, and its admission to scholarly association may be delayed on that ground. (c) In official documents relating to associations whose original or corporate names contained the *-al*, it may be necessary to retain it, trusting (as suggested by me in a paper before the "American Philological Association" last winter) that the leading linguistic societies, here and abroad, may take the initiative in titular curtailment.

Meantime we are bound to regard the following conditions:— (1) With English adjectives the termination *-al* alone presupposes the Latin antecedent *-alis*, of which there are numerous examples. (2) The termination *-ic* alone presupposes the Latin antecedent *-icus* (Greek *-ikos*), and of this there are numerous examples. But the English termination *-ical* presupposes the Latin antecedent *-icalis*, and in classic Latin this does not occur, so far as I am aware.

By whom and upon what grounds there were evolved the numerous adjectives in *-ical* matters little here. During the last half-century their number has materially diminished: we say *public*, not *publical*, and we no longer follow Thackeray with *heroical*, St. John with *epidemical*, or Scott with *aristocratical* and *enthusiastical*. Doubtless, in due time, this group of words will be dealt with by the Simplified Spelling Board.

I bespeak for the recommendations of the Board the earnest consideration of the medical profession and of scientists generally. The objections thus far published seem to me either exaggerated or based upon an inadequate comprehension of what is proposed. Only one of them can be mentioned here. The Etymologic or Historic Objection, as has been well said, is often urged by those who are not them-

5. Some who write *foetus* seem not to be aware that *foetus* also was used by the Romans. The would-be precisians who hold out for the diphthongs should make sure which is the right one in a given case: an extensive English work upon zoology has *cæcum* for *cæcum* (better *cecum*), even in the index. In the text and index of the last edition of the leading German work upon Comparative Anatomy *coecum* occurs, altho *cæcum* is used in the English translations of the two earlier editions. Such ostentatious pseudo-scholarship misleads others and excites derision in the better informed.

6. This is not strictly a matter of spelling; but it is involved in the same general idea of scientific simplification.

selves etymologists, and who could not, off hand, give the origin and transformations of any given ten consecutive words. But even were it otherwise, I hold that etymology and verbal history belong to special treatises and the larger dictionaries, and that words, the tools of thought, should not be encumbered by etymologic superfluities. How many givers of alms are aware that the word is the scanty remnant of a Greek word, *eleemosyne*?

Simplification of English spelling will avert waste in the present and for ourselves, and in still greater degree facilitate the educational progress of aliens and of all coming generations.

In this busy age no one has less time to waste than the medical practitioner. With no other class is altruism more nearly the dominating guide of life.

This remark, and previous ones as to the relations of the medical profession to Simplified Spelling, apply equally to all English-speaking members. But it seems to me that the physicians of this country should be peculiarly mindful of the situation and of their opportunities and obligations. As American doctors they should be acquainted with and proud of the pioneer work in this direction by Dr. George M. Gould, the editor of *American Medicine* and of standard medical dictionaries; since 1893 he has repeatedly and most forcibly expressed his convictions, especially in his "Suggestions to Medical Writers," 1900. As American scholars we should congratulate ourselves upon the existence of the Simplified Spelling Board, obtain its circulars (gratis) and study its recommendations.⁷ As American citizens we should support the President of the United States in his efforts to promote this great educational improvement. His courageous action has lifted the whole matter from the serene depths of academic contemplation to the turbulent surface waters of general and vigorous discussion; now, to quote the words of President Roosevelt's sole living predecessor, "it is a condition which confronts us—not a theory." To me, the President's attitude seems worthy to rank with his advocacy of the "strenuous life," with his declaration in favor of the "square deal," and with his achievement of peace between Russia and Japan.

7. So vital a matter as the improvement of the medium of human intercommunication should be dealt with deliberately by commissions of scholars, and not left to chance or the preference of the ill-informed multitude. As remarked, respecting the simplification of anatomic nomenclature, in the address, "Some misapprehensions," etc. (cited in Note 2), "Of all so-called leaders the most incapable, blundering and dangerous is 'General Usage.'"